DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 230 282 PS 013 547

AUTHOR Becker, Judith A.
TITLE Development of the Abilities to Produce and Interpret Requests with Nuances.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 11p.; Papers presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (50th, Detroit, MI, April 21-24, 1983) and at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association (New Orleans, LA, March 24-27, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; Age Differences; Children; *Cognitive Development; Communication Research; *Communication Skills; Cues; Semantics; *Social Cognition; Social Status; Syntax
IDENTIFIERS *Requests

ABSTRACT

Investigations were made of the development of (1) children's abilities to produce and interpret requests with nuances, and (2) the ability to identify requests as being "bossy" or "nice." In the first study, the development of children's ability to produce bossy and nice requests and the linguistic means by which they do so were explored. Twenty 5-year-old children, 20 10-year-old children, and 20 adults pretended to make telephone calls in which they asked peers to return a borrowed item. Each made three requests: a baseline request with no special instructions, a bossy request, and a nice request. Transcripts of tape recordings were coded for level of syntactic directness and number and type of semantic softeners and aggravators. Results showed that while all groups differentiated bossy and nice requests, preschool-age children relied primarily on semantics for differentiation. The second study assessed whether listeners identified requests by adding equally weighted cues or by some other means. Subjects heard 90 tape-recorded requests consisting of 45 different combinations of levels of syntactic directness, semantic aggravators and softeners, and tone. The 45 requests were spoken by a man and by a boy. Results indicated a developmental trend in the way subjects identified requests; with increased age, subjects took more cues into account and made more subtle judgments. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED230282

PS 013547

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ABILITIES TO PRODUCE AND INTERPRET REQUESTS WITH NUANCES

Development of the ability to produce requests with nuances

Judith A. Becker, Department of Psychology, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 33620.

Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, April, 1983, Detroit.

The ability to use language appropriately and strategically is the essence of pragmatic competence. Requests comprise a large part of children's early language. Children quickly learn that one typically uses requests that are syntactically indirect (e.g., I like to read; Do you have any books?) and contain semantic softeners (e.g., please; um; reasons) with listeners of higher status and requests that are syntactically direct (e.g., Gimme the book; I need the book) and contain semantic aggravators (e.g., threats; profanity) with lower status listeners. (See Becker, 1982, for a review of this literature.) It is important that children learn to control nuances such as niceness and bossiness in asking other people to do things for them. In this study, the development of children's ability to produce differentiable bossy and nice requests and the linguistic means by which they do so were investigated. One might expect a speaker to make a bossy request of a peer by asking more like a higher status speaker than is appropriate and make a nice request of a peer by asking more like a lower status speaker.

Twenty five-year-olds, 20 ten-year-olds, and 20 adults pretended to ask peers to return borrowed items over the telephone. Each made three requests (a baseline request with no special instructions, a bossy request, and a nice request) that were taperecorded. Two people independently transcribed the resulting monologues and chose (agreeing on 179 of 180) the one sentence from each that represented the first request subjects made for each instruction. Then, two experimenters blind to the purposes of the study coded all 180 requests for their level of syntactic directness (ranging from the highly direct imperative to the indirect question directive, as described by Ervin-Tripp, 1976) and number and type of semantic softeners and aggravators. Inter-rater agreement was quite high: syntactic directness, 98%; softeners, 93%; and aggravators, 96%.

All three age groups were able to differentiate their bossy and nice requests and they did so in the manner predicted. That is, they made bossy requests to imaginary peers by speaking as they would to lower status listeners and made nice requests by speaking as they would to higher status listeners. An analysis of variance on levels of syntactic directness and one on semantics revealed main effects of instruction. Bossy requests were more direct than nice requests, F (2, 108) = 28.47, $p < .001$. Similarly, bossy requests were more negative semantically than nice requests, with neutral requests falling in between. F (2, 108) = 28.79, $p < .001$.

The following six transcripts are good examples of the requests produced and analyzed in this experiment:

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Judith A. Becker
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Five-year-old boy

Neutral request: I want my ball back.
Bossy request: You give me that jacket back.
Nice request: Can you give me my book back?

Five-year-old girl

Neutral request: I want my jacket back.
Bossy request: Let me have my book back right now.
Nice request: Can you please give me my ball back?

Ten-year-old boy

Neutral request: I'd like to ha um know if you could bring it back to me.
Bossy request: I want my jacket back right now.
Nice request: I'd like to know if you're not using the ball and if I could um please have it back.

Ten-year-old boy

Neutral request: Well um could you bring it back some time today cause I, see I have to go somewhere and I need my jacket.
Bossy request: I want you to bring it over right now or I'll beat your face in.
Nice request: Well, could you please bring it over to me cause I need it really bad.

Man

Neutral request: And I've got some finals coming up and I'm going to need to use it to study from.
Bossy request: You want I want you to bring the ball over right now cause we're going to be leaving in about five minutes.
Nice request: Um I borrowed you my jacket last night and um there's no real hurry in returning it but, as, you know, whenever it's convenient for you I'd appreciate it if you'd have somebody bring it by or if maybe I could come over and get it from you.

Woman

Neutral request: I'd really like to use it for a for my class.
Bossy request: Could you please being it back over here right now?
Nice request: I wa I was just wondering if I could get my jacket back, but if you're cold that's that's OK you know I I really don't need it back right away, but, you know, whenever you're done with it um maybe you could just bring it over or something, but only only if um you don't need it any more.

While all three age groups were able to differentiate their bossy and nice requests, there were developmental differences in how successfully and in the ways that they did so. All of the ten-year-olds and adults could differentiate their requests, but only 70% of the five-year-olds could. Furthermore, the five-year-olds did not differentiate between bossy and nice requests as much as the older subjects did. This was true in two respects. First, the five-year-olds relied primarily on semantics in making their bossy requests different from their nice requests. The ten-year-olds and adults tended to use both syntax and semantics, thereby increasing the redundancy of their messages.

Table 1

Methods of differentiating bossy from nice requests for each age group

	Five-year-olds	Ten-year-olds	Adults
Semantics only	6	1	5
Syntax only	0	4	2
Semantics + Syntax	8	14	13
Other	6	1	0

Second, there was a significant interaction of instruction and age on semantics, F (4, 108) = 5.02, $p < .01$. With increasing age, subjects tended to use more semantic aggravators and softeners and thus make the difference between their bossy and nice requests greater.

The five-year-olds' lesser ability to differentiate their requests cannot be attributed to their inability to understand the meanings of bossy and nice. One of the criteria for inclusion in the study was being able to define these terms. One five-year-old, for example, explained that a bossy person will "tell 'em what to do; tell 'em to go up in their room." Another five-year-old said that being nice is when a person asks, "Do you wanna play?"

Clearly, the five-year-olds understood the concepts of bossiness and niceness. This is demonstrated by the children's definitions and by the fact that even the preschoolers were, in general, able to make their bossy requests meaningfully different from their nice ones. Even those children knew they could be bossy by issuing requests that made them appear powerful and be nice by issuing requests that made them appear weak. However, the older children and adults used a greater array of linguistic elements in differentiating their requests and were thus able to convey more and subtler nuances.

The production of requests that convey nuances is a good example of the way that children's cognitive, syntactic, and semantic abilities constrain their pragmatic skills. Many studies have revealed infants' pragmatic intentions and rudimentary pragmatic behaviors. With age, they are increasingly able to coordinate and integrate information, have more facility with language in general, and gain a greater knowledge of requests in particular.

References

Becker, J.A. Children's strategic use of requests to mark and manipulate social status. In S. Kuczaj (Ed.), Language development: Language, thought, and culture. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1982.

Ervin-Tripp, S. Is Sybil there? The structure of some American English directives. Language in Society, 1976, 5, 25-66.

Development of the ability to identify requests as bossy or nice

Judith A. Becker
Department of Psychology
University of South Florida
Tampa, FL 33620

Southeastern Psychological Association, New Orleans, March, 1982

Even for very young children, requests form a large part of early language and help get things done with the help of other children and adults. The results of laboratory and observational studies have shown that children produce and comprehend a wide range of request forms by the time they are five or six years old. Furthermore, children's distribution of these different forms in conversation is systematically related to a number of contextual factors, one of which (and the one most thoroughly studied) is the relative status of speaker and listener. Just as adults do, children tend to use requests that have a particular set of characteristics with listeners of higher status than they are and requests that have a different set of characteristics with listeners of lower status. (I should mention that, while relative status has been the major independent variable investigated, other variables such as familiarity affect children's use of requests. The generalizations I will discuss today tend to hold true when these other variables are held constant).

There are three characteristics which differentiate request forms to higher status listeners from request forms to lower status listeners: syntactic directness, semantic markers, and tone of voice. Children use these two types of request forms to differentiate adult from child listeners, fathers from mothers, dominant from less dominant peers, and a variety of status-linked roles such as doctor and nurse and teacher and pupil. (For a review of this literature, see Becker, 1982.)

Syntactic directness, as described by Ervin-Tripp (1976), is a measure of how explicitly the structure of the sentence indicates that it is a request and what that request is. Children tend to use more direct forms like the imperative Give me the book with lower status listeners and more indirect forms like the question Have any books? with higher status listeners.

The presence of semantic markers also differentiates the two groups of request forms. Semantic markers are words or phrases that change the meaning of a request and that can't be described in terms of syntactic directness. Requests to lower status listeners tend to include semantic aggravators like threats and profanity. Requests to higher status listeners, in contrast, tend to include semantic softeners like please, reasons for the request, and promises like If you give me that, I'll give you this. Similarly, tone differentiates the two groups of requests: requests to lower status listeners tend to have a loud, negative tone while requests to higher status listeners tend to have a soft, positive tone.

Essentially, requests to lower status listeners appear more threatening and straightforward. Requests to higher status listeners are more ambiguous and seem to provide listeners a variety of alternative responses.

The top of page one of your hand-out summarizes the typical characteristics of children's requests to higher and lower status listeners.

Given that the distribution of these requests is so systematic and predictable, it seemed reasonable to propose that syntactic directness, semantic softeners and

PS 013547

aggravators, and tone of voice might serve as cues for dominance and submissiveness. These cues could be used to infer actual or assumed status. Assumed status was operationalized as the nuances of bossiness and niceness.

Children's ability to infer social information from requests has not been carefully investigated. In previous work, I found that young children can use syntactic directness, semantic aggravators, and a loud, negative tone, in the absence of other information, as cues that the speaker is or is pretending to be of higher status. In preschoolers' terms, that person is being bossy. Syntactic indirectness, semantic softeners, and a soft, positive tone serve as cues for submissiveness or, again in preschoolers' terms, niceness.

In this prior work, children compared pairs of requests that differed only with respect to one of the cues for status. However, in everyday social interaction, children must interpret requests that simultaneously combine many cues. How do children do this?

Theorists such as Bates (1976), James (1978), and Lakoff (1972) have claimed that the number of cues a request has for submissiveness relates positively to the politeness or niceness of that request. That is, they suggest that we use an additive model in interpreting requests. The more cues for submissiveness a request has, the nicer it is.

I hypothesized, however, that the effect of these linguistic cues is not strictly additive. I had several reasons for believing this. First, an accumulation of cues for submissiveness does not necessarily make a request very nice. For example, although the use of low volume and a semantic softener like please make a request nice, the addition of several more pleases and a promise would probably make it obnoxious. Cues may be additive, but only within limits.

A second reason why cues in requests may not be viewed additively is that cues for dominance often co-occur with cues for submissiveness, but may be treated differently. Some types of cues may be weighted more heavily than others. For example, a request that appears to be nice syntactically and semantically might be identified as bossy because of its loud, negative tone.

Finally, a particular request may be more or less nice depending on who uses it with whom. That is, while it might be perfectly appropriate for an adult to say sternly to a child, "Give me that cup!", it would be less appropriate for the child to use that same request with the adult.

The experiment I am reporting today was designed to assess whether listeners identify requests by adding equally weighted cues or by some other means. Subjects heard 90 taperecorded requests, the components of which are shown on the bottom of page 1 of your hand-out. The requests consisted of 45 different combinations of levels of syntactic directness, semantic aggravators and softeners, and tone. Some of the requests had only cues for dominance, some had only cues for submissiveness, and many had cues for both dominance and submissiveness. This latter group could be described, given an additive model, as the number of cues for submissiveness minus the number of cues for dominance. Thus, they would have the net effect of a certain number of cues for submissiveness or dominance. The set of 45 requests was spoken both by a man and a boy.

20 five year olds, 20 ten year olds, and 20 adults participated in the experiment. Subjects sat in front of two telephones. Through one telephone they heard the man making requests; through the other, the boy. Requests were randomly ordered. In this procedure, one phone rang, the subject picked it up and listened to the request, and then the subject decided whether the request had been bossy or nice.

Well, what happened? Look at the figure on page two of your hand-out. It shows the proportion of "bossy" responses to requests categorized according to their net number of cues for dominance or submissiveness. As you can see, a strictly linear model cannot fully account for these data. There is almost a threshold effect in subjects' identifications of requests as bossy or nice with a shift in the pattern of responses at the point of no net cues for dominance or submissiveness. That is, requests that had a majority of cues for submissiveness were identified as being nice, while requests with a majority of cues for dominance were seen as bossy.

Rather than "adding" equally weighted cues, a closer look at the data revealed a developmental trend in the way subjects identified the requests. The older the subjects, the more cues they took into account and the more subtle their judgments became. In general, subjects weighted semantic cues most heavily. This was especially true for the five year olds, who relied almost solely on semantic markers to identify the requests. They simply saw requests with semantic softeners as nice and requests with semantic aggravators as bossy. Many of the five year olds reported that requests were nice "because he said please" or bossy "because he said dummy." This manner of interpretation was not, however, the result of their not perceiving the other cues. Several recognized the frequent discrepancy between semantics and other factors, but dismissed these other factors, explaining, for example, that the requests were nice even though they were said loudly or in a mean way, or were bossy in a "nice voice." These comments, and the fact that some children repeated each request verbatim in the precise tone of voice in which it was made, suggest that they were aware of the other factors, but simply did not take them into account in their identifications.

Although the ten year olds were also affected by semantics quite powerfully, they were somewhat more responsive to syntactic directness and to the loud, negative tone of voice, which depressed the effect of semantic softeners.

In contrast with the children, adults took more factors into account in identifying the requests. Their identifications were influenced by semantic markers, syntactic directness, and tone of voice. The speaker factor also influenced the adults: the most dominant request forms were seen as being bossier if they came from the boy than if they came from the man.

What does this study tell us? First, it suggests that when children and adults identify requests, they do not do so by adding equally-weighted cues for dominance and submissiveness. Rather, identifications are based primarily on semantic cues. This is especially true for the younger children. The strong effect of semantics for them may be due to the explicit training of semantics in early childhood, such as when parents admonish, "You can't have it until you say 'please'". Older children and adults (who are more experienced with requests and have a greater cognitive ability to process several factors simultaneously) consider more factors and make subtler distinctions in their identifications. Thus, it appears that very young children have at least rudimentary competence in identifying bossy and nice requests, and their ability is refined with age.

More importantly, these findings have broader implications for development. In terms of language, it is clear that pragmatic ability (that is, the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts) is not highly developed in the preschool and elementary school years. Children are not fully able to convey and interpret pragmatic nuances by means of requests until sometime after the age of ten. These limitations in turn have implications for social development. The skills I am studying may also be viewed as social cognitive skills. To the extent that children are not able to interpret subtle, social messages from peers and adults correctly, they are also not able to respond to those messages in social

interaction. Thus, the study of pragmatic development, the intersection between language and social development, can help us better understand both domains. Research on requests, I think, is a useful and interesting way to look at these issues.

References

Bates, E. Language and context. New York: Academic Press, 1976.

Becker, J.A. Children's strategic use of requests to mark and manipulate social status. In S. Kuczaj (Ed.) Language development: Language, thought, and culture. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1982.

Ervin-Tripp, S. Is Sybil there: The structure of some American English directives. Language in Society, 1976, 5, 25-66.

James, S. Effect of listener age and situation on the politeness of children's directives. Journal of Psycholinguistic Research, 1978, 7, 307-317.

Lakoff, R. Language and woman's place. Language in Society, 1972, 2, 45-80.

Development of the ability to identify requests as bossy or nice

Judith A. Becker
Department of Psychology
University of South Florida
Tampa, FL 33620

Southeastern Psychological Association, New Orleans, March, 1982

Characteristics of requests

To lower status listeners (i.e., cues for dominance/bossiness)	To higher status listeners (i.e., cues for submissiveness/niceness)
syntactic directness (e.g., Give me the book)	syntactic indirectness (e.g., Have any books?)
semantic aggravators (e.g., or else)	semantic softeners (e.g., please)
loud, negative tone	soft, positive tone

Components of stimulus sentences

syntactic directness

- Imperative: Give me the book.
- Permission directive: May I have the book?
- Hint: I like to read.

semantic markers

- 3 aggravators: . . . dummy, or I'll hit you, dummy.
- 1 aggravator: . . . dummy.
- none
- 1 softener: . . . please.
- 3 softeners: . . . please, and I'll give you a present, please.

tone of voice

- loud and negative
- neutral
- soft and positive

speaker

- man
- boy

Completely crossed design resulted in 90 stimulus sentences.

Figure 1. Proportion "Bossy" Responses to Different Requests